

# Organising and bargaining around mental health support in colleges



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*“Mental health is everyone’s business. We all have times when we feel down or stressed or frightened. Most of the time those feelings pass. But sometimes they develop into a more serious problem and that could happen to any one of us. Everyone is different. You may bounce back from a setback while someone else may feel weighed down by it for a long time. Your mental health doesn’t always stay the same. It can change as circumstances change and as you move through different stages of your life.*

*There’s a stigma attached to mental health problems. This means that people feel uncomfortable about them and don’t talk about them much. Many people don’t even feel comfortable talking about their feelings. But it’s healthy to know and say how you’re feeling.”*

**The Mental Health Foundation**

## How to use this guide

There are a huge variety of resources available online to support good mental health, but it can sometimes be difficult to navigate them and identify those that will be most relevant and useful.

This guide is designed to be used by reps in colleges and branches. It aims to point you in the direction of a few key resources to help you to organise around supporting the mental health of staff who work in colleges.

Begin by familiarising yourself with the key issues. The first section sets out why we need to organise and negotiate, drawing on what UNISON members nationally have told us and providing a useful basis for arguing why mental wellbeing should be a priority for employers. There is also a reminder of the relevant legislation, with links to further information for those who want to explore further.

To start a campaign on mental wellbeing in your college, you will find a section with suggestions of steps to take on page 6. It is a good idea to begin by finding out what staff concerns are, and a template of a questionnaire you could use for this purpose is provided at the end of this guide.

You can make sure all staff – including potential new members – know about your efforts to support their mental health using the accompanying poster (see page 11 or you can download it using stock number 4231 at [shop.unison.site](http://shop.unison.site)). This poster can be used on noticeboards and shared on your branch social media.

Making your college a place that supports people's mental wellbeing needs to be ongoing. In this guide you will find an extensive list of workplace policies and advice on ensuring that mental health support is given a prominent place in all of them.

Finally, this guide points you towards extra information and resources, including more detailed bargaining guidance and carefully written workshops that can be delivered to staff.



***“My employer has done surveys about staff wellbeing but I did not feel it was safe to say how I was feeling. I felt it would be used against me. It was not confidential.”***



## Why organise and negotiate to address mental health needs?

Mental health affects everyone. At different times in our lives we will all have times when we feel mentally stronger or less able to cope. Where mental health at work is concerned there can be a danger of employers focusing too much on the individual rather than their own responsibilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns and huge changes affecting our personal and professional lives have increased the levels of anxiety felt in colleges. In March 2021 UNISON conducted a survey of all our members working in FE and sixth form colleges across the UK.

## The UNISON 2021 mental health survey

Members reported that their anxiety levels increased significantly between March 2020 and March 2021.

86% of respondents reported feeling some level of anxiety about their wellbeing and safety at work in March 2021.

78% of staff reported feeling anxious about their workload, with an increase from 7% to 38% of staff who felt very anxious about this over the course of the year.

Many respondents expressed concerns about not being able to do the job they were employed to do and blurred lines concerning who should do what.

Many colleges offer a variety of support to staff, although comments submitted suggest that some staff feel this is more of a 'box-ticking exercise' and does not always lead to practical support when it is needed most. Of those who had used the support, by far the greatest number (over 40%) indicated that they had participated in counselling support, although over 4 in 5 had only used it once or twice.

Many staff felt that mental health support was very limited pre-pandemic. This is worrying since nearly half of all staff surveyed (46%) felt that they would need support for their mental health needs.

*"Before going off sick I had told my line manager my mental well-being was low - after several times I was given a booklet to read and told I could contact IAPT. Not really what I felt like - reading a booklet!"*

*"There are some wellbeing workshops but a main source of stress is having lost many staff and picking up extra work and responsibility with no extra pay."*

*"Our roles changed to the extent we were unsure what we were doing any more and this has made us anxious."*

*"Doing my job on-site where there are stresses and issues undermining staff well-being and even safety not being addressed - this is where I feel unsupported."*

*"My employer has done surveys about staff wellbeing but I did not feel it was safe to say how I was feeling. I felt it would be used against me. It was not confidential."*



Mental health problems vary markedly from clinically diagnosed conditions such as schizophrenia or borderline personality disorder through to depression and general anxiety disorder (for a full range of mental health problems, search: 'types of mental health problems' on the Mind website ([www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)))

Stress isn't a psychiatric diagnosis, but it is closely linked to mental health in that stress can cause mental health problems such as anxiety and depression or make existing problems worse, while mental health problems can in turn cause stress.



# Why employers need to act to support mental health in colleges

We should all expect employers to value staff enough to foster supportive and healthy working environments that make work manageable and enjoyable. It's the right thing to do. But sometimes the moral argument just isn't enough to make employers do things differently. Highlighting the business and legal impacts of inaction can help to make the case more strongly.

## The business case

Colleges cannot afford to ignore poor mental health in the workplace. In conversations with management, it can be helpful to focus on:

### Sickness absence

When staff feel valued and safe they are less likely to become so unwell that they will need to take time off sick. This improves the service that colleges provide and reduces the cost of finding staff to cover for those who are off sick. Additionally, management time will not be absorbed by return to work interviews.

### Reduced productivity

When staff feel anxious and/or stressed it will be difficult for them to perform their roles to the best of their ability. This will have knock-on effects on the smooth running of the college. Supporting mental health will lead to improvements in morale which in turn leads to increased productivity.

### Staff turnover

Some staff will leave if they feel their job is not worth the costs to their mental health. Colleges lose knowledgeable staff and skills and instead need to meet the costs of recruiting new members of staff. This will be hindered if the college gets a reputation for high staff turnover.

## The legal case

Mental health is a health and safety issue and college managers have a duty to assess work-related stress/mental health in the same way they would address other health and safety issues.

### Health & Safety at Work Act 1974<sup>1</sup>

This Act clearly requires employers to ensure the 'welfare' of their employees, so far as reasonably practicable, when at work. Employers should recognise the risk that work-related stress can pose.

### Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999<sup>2</sup>

These regulations place a legal duty on employers to protect employees from stress at work by doing a risk assessment and acting on it.

### Equality Act 2010<sup>3</sup>

Mental health problems can (but not always) be categorised as a disability which is a protected characteristic. An employee is defined as disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on their ability to do their normal daily activities.

1 <https://www.hse.gov.uk/legislation/hswa.htm>

2 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1999/3242/contents/made>

3 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>



## Developing a campaign around mental health support

1. Establish the extent of the problem using a staff survey. You'll find a template at the end of this guide that can be adapted to help with this. This could either be a survey of support staff only, to highlight their concerns, or you could consider a joint survey with the recognised teaching union(s) in your college to highlight the concerns of all staff.
2. Analyse the results of the survey and put this on the agenda for your next meeting with managers. Look for particular trends, equalities issues and any suggestions you can make to management for what can be done about this.
3. Let members know the results of the survey and managers' responses to it. This can either be in an email to all members in your college or through a members' meeting.
4. Use the poster available to show a few key headlines – what you found out through the survey, what successes you've had tackling the issues raised, and how people can join UNISON to be part of the campaign.
5. Set up the Staying Strong workshop, available to members and non-members to support staff with issues around stress management. Details of this can be found in the list of resources on page 8.
6. Promote all that you are doing on your UNISON social media pages. If you do not already have Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. for your branch, now would be a great time to set one up and encourage members to join in.
7. Contact your regional office and explore how to work with them to develop a campaign on the issues identified.
8. Let the national office know what you are doing by emailing [education@unison.co.uk](mailto:education@unison.co.uk) and your efforts will be shared through social media and in the annual seminar.



# How to negotiate agreement(s) with the employer

A really strong starting point is getting a commitment from the employer to use the Health and Safety Executive's standard system for monitoring and, most importantly, controlling workload, so that you have a systematic way of seeing the stress points across an organisation. A link to this is in the training and resources section on page 8.

Another good practice is to seek agreement on a system that enables staff to raise concerns about mental health outside their immediate line manager.

You can consider working with the college management to establish a separate mental health policy, however the college will already have a set of policies which cover many of the issues and mental health should be a consideration running through all of them.



1. Begin with the **workload policy**. Seek a commitment to train managers in how they identify excessive pressures on staff and then take action to resolve it.
2. Look next at the **flexible working policy**. The key point in flexible working policies is to get a clearly defined and wide range of flexible working options established because they offer a way of both reducing the likelihood of staff experiencing mental health problems in the first place and they provide a ready-made set of options when confronted with finding ways to help staff experiencing mental health problems by making adjustments to their working arrangements. Common forms of flexible working are part-time working, adjusting start and finish times, job-sharing, compressed hours, homeworking and career breaks.
3. Insensitively handled **organisational change** is another common detonator of mental health problems, so all major changes should be accompanied by clear communication of plans and fair procedures and processes for handling staff concerns – those aspects of handling change which if handled badly can raise stress among the workforce – but also the inclusion of mental health in any equality impact assessment of changes.

4. The **bullying and harassment policy** gives an opportunity to make a clear statement about the seriousness with which the organisation will treat the protection of people with mental health problems across the full range of bullying and harassment, from clearly offensive remarks right through to more subtle behaviour, like shunning certain individuals from social circles. A strong policy that highlights exactly what behaviour is unacceptable and what action will be taken against it should serve as both a warning to perpetrators and a helping hand to those experiencing bullying or harassment.
5. In **recruitment policies**, check that procedures are in place to avoid any arrangements that discriminate against anyone experiencing mental health problems.
6. A good **induction programme** will prevent undue stress on new staff. The early weeks after joining an organisation can be particularly stressful and liable to exacerbate mental health problems, so consider these needs, for example through a 'buddy' system.
7. **Sickness absence and capability policies** are closely connected and it is critical to protect people experiencing health problems from disciplinary action arising out of these policies. The single biggest issue here is to try to ensure that agreements contain clauses that classify absence due to mental health problems as disability leave and not as sickness absence. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has designated that, in some cases, classifying absence due to disability in that way could be considered what the law defines as a **reasonable workplace adjustment**.

## UNISON training and support materials

Staying Strong Workshop

<https://learning.unison.org.uk/2020/03/30/unison-learning-for-mental-health-and-wellbeing/>

Stress toolkit

<https://shop.unison.site/product/guarding-against-stress-a-toolkit-for-success/>

COVID-19 Bargaining guide

<https://www.unison.org.uk/covid-19-pandemic-bargaining-over-workplace-issues-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-v1/>

Bargaining on mental health guidance

<https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2018/05/25005.pdf>

There for You, UNISON's charity for members, can help signpost members to organisations providing mental health support. Encourage members to speak to the branch welfare officer, email [thereforyou@unison.co.uk](mailto:thereforyou@unison.co.uk) or visit [www.unison.org.uk/thereforyou](http://www.unison.org.uk/thereforyou)

## Other sources

HSE stress management indicator tool

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/assets/docs/indicatortool.pdf>

Charlie Waller Trust <https://charliewaller.org/>

## Keep in touch on social media

UNISON Campaigning in Further Education and Sixth Form Colleges Facebook group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/142274199135739>

UNISON Scotland Further Education Facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/UNISONScotlandFE/>

UNISON Cymru/Wales Learning Facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/unisoncymruwaleslearning>

UNISON in FE on Twitter [www.twitter.com/UNISON\\_FE](https://www.twitter.com/UNISON_FE)

Plus visit the national colleges webpages for the latest news and information [www.unison.org.uk/colleges](http://www.unison.org.uk/colleges)



# Template survey for mental health needs

## 1. Gender:

- Male
- Female
- Identify in another way
- Prefer not to say

## 2. Your ethnicity:

- Asian/Asian British
- Black/Black Caribbean/Black African/Black British
- Mixed/Multiple ethnic group
- White/White Irish/White British
- Other .....

## 3. Your age:

- 16-26
- 27-47
- 47+

## About your mental health:

### 4. Over the last 12 months, please indicate your feelings in relation to the 4 areas below:

|   | Very anxious | Fairly anxious | Not very anxious | Not anxious at all | I don't know |
|---|--------------|----------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| COVID-19 in general   |              |                |                  |                    |              |
| The impact of COVID-19 on your wellbeing and safety at work |              |                |                  |                    |              |
| Your job security   |              |                |                  |                    |              |
| Your workload   |              |                |                  |                    |              |

### 5. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not feeling stressed at all and 10 being a feeling of being completely overwhelmed by stress at work, how would you rate your stress levels?

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

### 6. Have you ever made use of any of the following types of support at work:

|  | This is not available at the college as far as I know | Between 1 and 5 times | Between 6 and 10 times |
|--|---|-----------------------|------------------------|
| A confidential helpline  |   |                       |                        |
| Counselling support  |   |                       |                        |
| Exercise classes or any other kind of support for physical exercise                    |   |                       |                        |
| Support to balance home schooling and carer responsibilities brought about by Covid-19 |   |                       |                        |
| Training courses on managing your own wellbeing  |   |                       |                        |
| Wellbeing days or activities   |   |                       |                        |
| Other support [please specify]   |   |                       |                        |

**7. Please rate the following statements**

|   | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neither agree or disagree | Agree | Strongly agree | Not applicable |
|---|-------------------|----------|---------------------------|-------|----------------|----------------|
| Leaders and managers create space for staff to raise mental health problems and give permission to talk about problems that are affecting them (including non-work issues)? |                   |          |                           |       |                |                |
| There is an awareness of mental health needs at all levels in my college  |                   |          |                           |       |                |                |
| The support on offer in respect of mental health and wellbeing is appropriate for my needs  |                   |          |                           |       |                |                |
| I feel comfortable talking about my mental health needs to colleagues   |                   |          |                           |       |                |                |
| I feel comfortable talking to colleagues about their mental health needs  |                   |          |                           |       |                |                |

**8. Do you feel the college needs to do more to support mental health?**

Yes

No

Unsure

**9. Do you feel you need more support with your mental health?**

Yes

No

Unsure

**10. What suggestion would you make to support improved mental health at the college?**

# Your mental health matters



mental health

You said...

**Times are tough in colleges. Out of control workloads, staffing shortages and insecure work can all have a serious impact on wellbeing and morale and can contribute to stress, anxiety and depression.**

**Mental health is a health and safety issue. Your UNISON branch is working hard to ensure that your employer creates a college workplace where mental health is a top priority.**

...We did

UNISON ..... branch

Supporting you at .....

..... college

**Not in UNISON yet? Join the college support staff experts at [join.unison.org.uk](http://join.unison.org.uk) or call 0800 171 2193.**

**UNISON**  
the public service union

***“There are some wellbeing workshops but a main source of stress is having lost many staff and picking up extra work and responsibility with no extra pay.”***

